

The Fruitless Fig Tree

“When [Jesus] came to [the fig tree], he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it” (vv. 13b–14).

- [Mark 11:12–14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2011.12%E2%80%9314) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2011.12%E2%80%9314>)

Reformed theology emphasizes Christ’s threefold office as the Prophet who brings God’s Word to us, the Priest who atones for sin and intercedes for us, and the King who rules and reigns over us (WSC 23–26). Of particular note for our study today is our Lord’s prophetic office, for what Jesus does in [Mark 11:12–14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2011.12%E2%80%9314) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2011.12%E2%80%9314>) is very much in keeping with the prophets who came before Him.

In addition to proclaiming God’s revelation verbally, the old covenant prophets sometimes performed what have been called “enacted parables” in which their actions conveyed a truth from our Creator. One example of this is Jeremiah’s purchase of a field in Judah during Babylon’s siege of Jerusalem ([Jer. 32](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer.%2032) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer.%2032>)). From a human perspective, the purchase did not make much sense. Jerusalem was about to fall and Jeremiah would not be able to enjoy his new land. But God had the prophet buy the field in order to teach the people a lesson. Yes, the exile was coming and the residents of Judah would be taken off to Babylon. But the exile would not last forever and the people would return to their homeland. Jeremiah’s owning a piece of property was a tangible example of that. It showed that the Judahites’ loss of the land was not permanent, that they would be coming back to what they had left behind and taking up ownership again.

Jesus’ cursing of the fruitless fig tree is an enacted parable. The sign that Palestinian fig trees have fruit is that their foliage appears in full bloom, so Jesus expected to find something to eat when He saw a fig tree in leaf ([Mark 11:12–13a](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2011.12%E2%80%9313a) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2011.12%E2%80%9313a>)). Some have said that Jesus’ expectations were incorrect, since Mark tells us “it was not the season for figs” (v. 13b). There are two possible explanations for this. First, there are different varieties of fig trees in that part of the world, not all of which bear fruit in the same season. Mark may have been saying that it was not the season in which most fig trees would bear fruit, but that the fig tree Jesus saw was one that bore fruit in the season when most others did not. Second, even when it was not the season for mature figs, Palestinian fig trees in leaf had smaller, unripe figs that were edible, if not as tasty as ripe figs. Either way, Jesus was clearly not wrong to expect fruit when He saw lush foliage.

The Old Testament prophets sometimes used barren fig trees to show divine judgment on Israel ([Hos. 2:12](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hos.%202.12) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Hos.%202.12>)), and Jesus’ curse should be viewed in that context. His curse of the fruitless fig tree was a sign that judgment was about to come on Jerusalem.

Coram Deo

Jesus cursed the fig tree for its fruitlessness, for not living up to what it appeared to be when it had foliage but no figs. That is a warning to all who profess faith in Him. We are to bear fruit for God's glory, and if we are not bearing fruit in service to God and neighbor, we must repent and rely on His grace. If we do not, that may be a sign that we are not in His kingdom after all.

Passages for Further Study

Jeremiah 24

[Joel 1:1–12 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Joel%201.1%E2%80%9312\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Joel%201.1%E2%80%9312)

[Matthew 21:18–19 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2021.18%E2%80%9319\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2021.18%E2%80%9319)

[Luke 13:6–9 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2013.6%E2%80%939\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2013.6%E2%80%939)

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